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Christine de Pizan and Sacred History

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Christine de Pizan was an author living in 15th century France whose writings highlighted the courageous actions of women that helped to strengthen their society. Living under the shadow of misogynist writers, she illuminated the female's right to equality long before other French writers would broach the subject. Particularly enlightening in this respect is her book *The City of Women*, presenting the positive attributes of women. Globally speaking, Jeffrey Richards has interpreted the book as a treatise on religious doctrine. I will seek to demonstrate what I believe to be her true intent: to lay a foundation of equality of the sexes for future generations to debate. My goal is to refute, as an interpretive error, Richards's vision of *The City of Women* as something entirely different: an attempt to "assign eschatological significance both to current events and to the history of women" (15), and as such to establish *The City of Women* as a metaphor for redemption. This metaphor cannot stand as accepted fact without diminishing the equitable nature that de Pizan applies to women from all time periods and all persuasions. I hope to restore a surer footing to a work that inspires men and women everywhere to embrace their inherent equality.

Feminism as a movement finds its foundation in revelation. This revelation occurs every time a woman recognizes an instance of misogyny. Misogyny is, simply put, a hatred and distrust of women. Not surprisingly, many women have fought against misogynistic attitudes. One courageous individual who exposed the need to refute such attitudes was Christine de Pizan. An author extraordinaire, living in 15th century France under the shadow of misogynistic writers, de Pizan struggles to alleviate the horror she feels in her own soul as she contemplates the subservient attitude society placed on the shoulders of women such as she. Seeking solace, she turns to writing as a redemptive tool (1.1.1).

de Pizan is known as "France's First Woman of Letters" (Willard). She addresses the misogynistic ideas and practices so rampant and unchallenged in her day in her most famous work *The City of Women*. Writer Jeffrey Richards, in considering de Pizan's motives for constructing such a city,

rightly notes that de Pizan models her famous City after Augustine's well-known City of God (16). It is certainly true that de Pizan was undoubtedly very familiar with the work and that both works present many obvious parallels. With the aide of divine sources, a city is constructed that will endure, and the inhabitants must exhibit conduct worthy of the impeccable city they will inhabit. Walls are built of valuable character traits. Yet for all of the similarities, there are dissimilar traits that separate the two works. I hope to show that these differences seriously undermine specific claims that Richards put forward concerning this work.

A quick comparison of Augustine's City of God and de Pizan's City of Women will highlight those differences as well as reveal similarities in form and structure that the two cities share. Augustine wrote about his City after Rome had been sacked in the 5th century. At that time, the Romans thought their city would exist eternally as the most powerful city in the world. They worshipped many pagan gods. In contrast, Constantine, the new Roman emperor, supported Christianity as a valid religion. The people wondered why Constantine's Christian God did not protect their great city. In their distress, they felt the destruction they incurred was because they no longer worshipped their many gods as they had before Christianity had gained popularity. A devout Christian, Augustine dedicated the first ten books of his work as a response to their belief that Christianity was to blame for the demise of Rome. While Constantine refutes the criticisms of Christianity, he also builds an alternative space, his City of God, for people to dwell in eternally. de Pizan similarly refutes criticisms, as she answers the misogynous claims of men against women, and also creates another place for women to live, her City of Women.

Both authors show that the situation regarding the time period in which they are writing was not unique. de Pizan, writing about misogyny, recounts historical accounts of misogyny. Augustine, discussing the reasons for the recent destruction of Roman cities, reminds his readers of the reasons for the destruction of powerful cities from the past. de Pizan and Augustine address the idea of fate, a common medieval concept, and mediate its importance in deciding human activity. de Pizan, writing to the fate of women, emphasizes that women were not created by God to be inferior and suffer ill treatment by men. Likewise, Augustine, considering the fate of men, states that predestination does not condemn a city to destruction because of its religious nature. In turn, each author explains the continuing existence of their cities. Augustine says that a city could overcome trouble because of the truth of the reality of the good nature of his Christian God who protects those who worship him. de Pizan remarks that her city will endure as long as the earth does. She notes that the virtuous nature characterizing her women, a result of their strong, benevolent actions, ensures the survival of the city.

This is where the similarities of the two works part ways. Augustine continues on to discuss the contrasting qualities of a symbolically existent City of Man, where the unsaved live, and his City of God, that is reserved for the faithful. Augustine spends most of his book restating the Bible and praising the character of his God. He gives an evangelistic plea for conversion that guarantees man's eternal occupancy in the City of God. However, de Pizan spends the better part of her book discussing individual female examples of noteworthy acts that equal or excel those of men. She extols people, specifically women, but Augustine exalts his God, concentrating his readers' minds on the unseen. The eternal nature of Augustine's City contrasts the earthly, symbolic presence of de Pizan's. Human beings could only hope for an unseen eternity in the City of God, but women could mentally and presently inhabit the City of Women.

Richards has authored a treatise of de Pizan's work which he entitles: *Christine de Pizan and Sacred History*. In his commentary, he claims that de Pizan makes an attempt to "assign eschatological significance both to current events and to the history of women" (15). In the Merriam Webster Dictionary Online, eschatology is defined as: "a belief concerning death, the end of the world, or the ultimate destiny of humankind; specifically, any of various Christian doctrines concerning the Second Coming, the resurrection of the dead, or the Last Judgment" (Eschatology). His statement infers that the City of Women is a metaphor for Christian redemption, which necessarily diminishes the equitable nature that de Pizan applies to women from all time periods and all persuasions.

In de Pizan's time, the authority of the Catholic Church to determine religious doctrine was unquestionable. de Pizan's book would have been considered heresy had it been viewed as anything other than exactly what she claimed it was. Clearly, de Pizan intends that "ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and defense against the various assailments" (3.19.1). Her desire was to frame a city where women exemplified qualities that were normally reserved for men. In doing so, she laid a foundation for sexual equality that defended the integrity of women. Earnestly she writes that "no-one will reside there (in the City) except all women of fame and women worthy of praise for the walls of the city will be closed to those women who lack virtue" (1.3.3).

It must be noted that worldly fame and human praise are not Christian values. In fact, Catholic doctrine concerning the praise of men is discussed on a website entitled *Catholics United for Him*, which includes excerpts from official church policy. Concerning the motivation for praiseworthy acts, readers are directed to Matthew 6:1, where Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven" (Sri 1). The same website presents doctrine that discourages any desire for fame. Modesty, however, is encouraged, as this reference illustrates, "Modesty is, as it were, the body's conscience. The modest person is not interested in displaying his talents and attainments for people to admire. He even shuns making himself the subject of conversation" (Demarco1). de Pizan really had no Christian basis to use either the praise of men or fame as an attribute that would gain one entrance into a Christian city. Yet she did not characterize her City as Christian.

Finally, the last quality she mentions, as a requirement for finding a home in her City, is virtue. While virtue is definitely a Christian attribute when it is defined in biblical terms, we see that de Pizan's examples exhibit behavior that would not pass the biblical test for the word "virtue." Specifically, the online version of the Oxford Dictionary describes virtue as "behavior showing high moral standards." Catholicism defines 'moral' behavior in its doctrine, which, as I have illustrated, does not always describe de Pizan's virtuous women. We see therefore, that nowhere in her book is virtue, praise, or fame uniformly associated with Christian salvation.

In fact, de Pizan's re-characterization of virtue is the key for the justification of the women she places in her City. It must be noted that, as was common in her time period, she often rewrote and utilized the ideas and works of other authors in order to support her message. Many scholars have noted her use of Boccaccio, Dante, and Boethius. Likewise, de Pizan redefined commonly-used terms and concepts. Her transformative creativity is explained in an article by Rene Blumsfield-Kosinski entitled "*Christine de Pizan and the Misogynistic Tradition*." Medieval society considered

women to be naturally evil. Typically, goodness could only be attributed to men, which was their natural state. When morally good behavior was exhibited in women, it was considered unnatural. Actually, the medieval mind had standards of goodness that were gender determined. The actions of women that could be characterized as 'good' were those that involved self-control, subjugation to authority, and meekness. In contrast the goodness of men was seen in acts of courage, strength, boldness, and displays of authority. While men's good actions were considered natural, women's good actions were thought to be unnatural.

Blumsfield-Kosinski discusses how de Pizan re-characterized the idea of the 'unnatural' woman. First, de Pizan gave women a good nature, reflecting their self-restraint and desire to seek peace, redefining what the Catholic Church considered to be morally good. She then extrapolated the definition of unnatural to include actions that were authoritative, powerful, and immoral. She stated that those unnatural actions were necessary to enable women to live in ways that were naturally good. In doing so, she justified what was unnatural and removed morality from the definition of what was natural and unnatural. As she redefined terms, de Pizan changed the nature of commonly held beliefs, many of which were reflected in the works of authors she often rewrote and turned to for support. Essentially, de Pizan's women were good, but not in accordance with the standards set forth by the Catholic Church.

From Richards's eschatological standpoint, each of these women should represent an opportunity to exhibit salvation; however, Richards ignores the fact that many of de Pizan's women are decidedly pagan. Christian salvation would not have interested them. According to Augustine of Hippo, pagans would be barred from the biblical City of Revelations which is reserved for the redeemed. In chapter 25 of his work, *The City of God*, he names a long list of offenders who will not enter his City. As he writes, Augustine alternates the use of his City and the biblical City to the degree that they literally become synonymous. Therefore, to be excluded from the City of Revelations is essentially paramount to being excluded from Augustine's City. It is Jesus who says: "Blessed are those who ...and may go through the gates into the city. Outside (or those who are banned from entry) are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (Augustine 25). So, how does one get into Augustine's City? Augustine himself rephrases the words in Revelations that state that the way into the biblical "heavenly city," which he references as being his City of God, is "by grace freeing nature from sin" (Augustine 4). According to Augustine and the Bible, the only way for a human being to be absolved from all of these sins is to accept the grace of God, and the grace of God is received through Christian redemption.

de Pizan finds many of her women from those who dwell outside of Richards's City. Let us take a closer look at this particular group. We'll begin with the "dogs" Jesus mentioned. Dogs are a metaphor for evil people in the Bible (Psalms 22.16). In John 19.12 of the Bible, they are likened to the people who wanted Jesus crucified (John 19.12). They are friends of Caesar, common Roman citizens, and Roman emperors who disdained Christians (Milani 1). de Pizan extols two Roman citizens: Marcia and Sempronia, both of whom are destined for her City. Marcia was a noble virgin whose skill at painting "excelled all men" (1.41.3). Sempronia was known for her intelligence and persuasive powers. She could make everyone "do what she wanted" (1.42.2), and she could do "all those things which the human mind can comprehend" (1.42.2).

de Pizan further praises several Roman emperors, including Trajan and Octavian, both of whom horrifically persecuted the Christian population. According to the *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, the 3rd Roman persecution occurred in about 108 A.D. during the reign of the Roman Emperor Trajan. Roman emperors such as Octavian, whom de Pizan also praised, considered themselves to be gods or sons of gods. The Romans worshiped multiple gods until the establishment of the Catholic Church, and Christians living in Rome suffered because of their monotheistic religion, which challenged current political authority. The website entitled *United Nations of Roma Victrix* states that "The Romans had little concern over either Jewish or Christian practices on their own; it was their steadfast dedication to their own gods that would eventually lead to problems" (Heaton).

Another type of individual who is disallowed entry to the City of God is the one who practices the magic arts, so we consider Dido, one of the women of strength de Pizan mentions. Well-versed in the magic arts, Dido used an elaborate magical ritual to bring her lover back to her (1.46.1). In addition, we have the sexually immoral who, according to the Bible, indulge in the following acts: adultery, fornication, homosexuality and lesbianism, intercourse with animals, sexual intercourse with close relatives or sexual intercourse with a divorced man or woman. de Pizan mentions several instances of women who indulged in one or more of these "sins" unashamedly. One group of women cited were the Amazons who had sex with neighboring tribes a few times a year only to get pregnant. They never married the fathers of their children nor lived with them (1.16.1).

Also associated with our group of outsiders are murderers. One woman who lacked qualms when it came to eliminating those who opposed her was named Queen Fredegund of France. As Queen, she is quoted as having killed many enemies in war (1.23.1). But combative opponents weren't enough for her. Riding tent to tent, Fredegund murdered the helpless unarmed individuals who had remained behind (1.13.1). Moreover, there was a Queen Penthesilea who was enraged when a knight she loved was killed by the Greeks in battle. Quickly, the Queen took revenge, killing numerous Greek men and severely injuring the son of the one who had killed her beloved. de Pizan writes, "Penthesilea certainly demonstrated to the son, without room for doubt, that she hated his father" (1.19.2). It is subject to little if any doubt whether Penthesilea would enjoy praise from Augustine for her brave reactions.

We need to address as well the idolaters who share the fate of being outside the gates of the City of God. They are very easy to locate in the City of Women. There is Juno, a goddess and an idol, whom the other women of the city of Samos entreated for help in their time of need (2.61.2). Juno is highly thought of by de Pizan. Then there is Claudia Quinta, a Roman woman who engaged in idolatry. She prayed before the image of the Magna Mater of Pessinus, who de Pizan called the mother of all gods, so that the image would be transported to Rome as a sign of her chastity (2.63.2). Assuredly there are others, and the examples I've cited are but a few of the women residing in de Pizan's City who would never be accepted into Augustine's City of God or the biblical City it resembles.

de Pizan seemed to accept many women who were 'less than perfect.' She did not seek to fill her City with spotless trophies, but rather with examples of people, be they fictitious or not, who were brave and adventurous. She did not invite perfect candidates who fit a specific model as Augustine did. She rejected the idea that an individual could use her religious affiliation to be credited with virtue. Rather, de Pizan was not an easy person to please. We see that her women were quite

adventurous, fearless and dead-set on attaining the goals they attempted. Their behavior in the bedroom was not their crown; they did not hide behind an act of 'redemption' to embrace their goodness. Often they defeated their enemies and the enemies of the oppressed through warfare and murder. They were sure of themselves and took actions that reflected their self-worth and faith, in spite of the opinions of others concerning the weakness and inconstancy of the female sex. They were not ashamed to declare their beliefs, whether Christian or pagan. Certainly, they made use of what they had—if their tongues could not speak forth factual truth, they nevertheless injected their heart-felt desire for true and right consequences into their perspective situations. Having confidence, they did not shirk from invoking whatever power was available to them, wherever they could find it, to achieve their goals. These women were crowned with virtue because of their achievements.

We could speak of so many, but suffice it to say that all of the women in de Pizan's City accomplished great things that required great feats of endurance and courage: feats that marked them as virtuous, but sometimes rendered them unqualified for the redeemed status Augustine demanded for his City. While there are similarities in form and structure between Augustine's City and de Pizan's City, the Cities serve as destinations for two very different groups of people. Augustine places the redeemed of Christ in his City. In contrast, de Pizan embraces the virtuous regardless of religious affiliation in hers. She did not construct a mirrored City of God. It was not her goal to enshrine women or to simply extol the benefits of being female. Rather, she created a literary masterpiece, to serve as a bulwark of truth, to be referenced by anyone searching out the true nature of women. Erroneous misogynistic beliefs of her day were countered by the virtuous and emboldened lifestyles of those she profiled.

In consonance with this view, de Pizan begins her book with a personal experience of misogyny and the resulting revelation of her own worth, which inspired her to create her City. One evening she was resting in her study. Desiring to read an uplifting text, she picks up a short work by Mathéolus, a popular writer of the period. In no time she encounters some all too familiar derogatory remarks concerning her sex. She put the book down at this point and began to lament her plight as a woman. Exasperated by the outright hatred and accusations from those who desired to blame the female for every problem known to mankind, de Pizan searched her heart for an avenue whereby she could encourage her sister females to recognize and embrace the equality and integrity that was their due (1.1.2).

Since writing was her calling, de Pizan began the work for which she would become most famous. She includes women from Ethiopia, France, Greece, and Rome, to name just a few of the peoples represented (1.12.1, 1.13.1, 1.19.1, and 1.29.1). She embraces not only Mary, Jesus' mother, but also Apollo, Neptune, Minerva, Jupiter, Saturn and a host of other deities (3.19.1, 1.4.2, 1.47.1, 1.39.1, 1.15.1). Questions concerning the hateful ideas men hold about women are answered by three angelic representatives, or Sibyls, who are sent by "God" to aid her in building the City of Women. These three "Women" never mention the need for salvation, nor do they encourage any type of evangelistic endeavors. Rather they speak solely of exhibiting the virtue of women by citing their good deeds and admirable character traits.

The misogynistic treatment of women is pursued, as many well-known authors and philosophers are targeted for their generalized attacks on the female sex. Aristotle, Mathéolus, Cicero, and Ovid

are a few of those mentioned as expressing a misogynous perspective through their writings. A strong defense is needed to address these universally respected authors.

That defense and one last telling argument against Richards's claims can be found in the placement of the foundation stone for de Pizan's City. We are told that the Zodiac, or the art of astrology, prophesied who was to be the first stone. We do not have a biblical character as would be expected for a biblical city. Indeed, the first woman in the mind of 15th century Catholics was Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was worshipped as deity and considered a virgin, pure and holy. She was in a position in heaven to grant women answers to their prayers by placing their requests with Jesus, but she was under his authority, for the Bible establishes the absolute male patriarchal hierarchy. de Pizan sets her to rule the City along with her entourage from heaven, as she calls her the head of the feminine sex. However, a truly biblical city would never set a woman in authority over a man. The cornerstone of a construction project held the seed or model of the entire project; Mary is established as a symbol of ultimate femininity, the woman who does possess authority by her very position and nature. She is not the mold of the female who is to inhabit the City, even though she fits into that mold.

Instead a woman from the city of Nineveh, whose people are enemies of the Jewish people of the Bible, is chosen to support the City, giving it a pagan legitimacy. Semiramus, a "woman of very great strength" (1.15.1), and an inhabitant of Nineveh becomes the foundation stone. Actually, she is the widow of Ninus who established the city of Nineveh. After Ninus dies, Semiramus incorporates most of the known world into her kingdom. She even marries her own son so that no other woman would become queen, as she deemed no other as strong and skilled as she was. de Pizan excuses the incest by saying that laws against it hadn't yet been established; therefore it was permitted. We could hardly imagine Augustine allowing Semiramus into his City. And the fact that she is the first stone supports the claim that paganism is of no consequence in the selection of the inhabitants in de Pizan's City.

With so much in de Pizan's *City of Women* pointing solely to the misogynistic treatment of women as the principal "raison d'être," it is difficult to imagine how anyone could see an eschatological motive behind her book. Indeed, to do so diminishes the reasons she created her City. I would reiterate that idolatry, paganism, biblically defined sexual immorality, evil people or 'dogs,' liars, murderers, and those who engage in the art of magic much less other biblically-prohibited behaviors such as incest, deity worship and veneration are permissible in de Pizan's City if they serve her purpose. That purpose was to display admirable character traits and the various beneficial works performed by her women, apart from the requirements Christianity entails.

In conclusion, I argue that Jeffrey Richards misses the point when he claims that Christine de Pizan built a City of Women in accordance with the model of Augustine's City of God in order to ascribe an eschatological meaning to her work. Frankly, the motives which inspired the *City of Women* are clearly stated in the work itself. de Pizan experiences a revelation concerning her feminine nature as she reads a popular misogynistic text. She feels anguish in her soul as she contemplates the common derogatory view of women that overshadows her society. 15th century France demanded women be subservient. Writers of the time vehemently espoused that attitude. de Pizan was a product of that society, yet she courageously explored the foundation for such an erroneous view of women. Relieved to discover results contrary to the prevailing conception of